

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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Brajabuli: Sanskrit and Vernacular Poetics Redefined

Brajabuli lyrics maybe described as a tradition in which every component is intentionally affected by poesis - from its composite linguistic matrix, its exotic prosody (relative to Middle Bengali), its densely crafted rhetoric, and, of course, its very subject matter that mentally and emotionally projects the reader into the divine līlā. Therefore, few things are “natural” in Brajabuli. And yet, no one would contest the status of Brajabuli as a “vernacular language” (i.e. bhāṣā as opposed to Sanskrit). With this paper, I will discuss how Brajabuli padāvalī poses a problem for the language order in premodern South Asia as it is understood today, and how it redefined the relation between Sanskrit and vernacular poetics. One way to approach such issues will be to observe the role of Sanskrit in the background and reception of various padakartās, from Vidyāpati to Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur. I will also give special attention to the works of two prolific authors who very self-consciously crafted their Brajabuli diction and their oeuvre: Govindadās and Narahari Cakravartī. Another way to treat the topic of Brajabuli as a poetic idiom is to take a step aside from Sanskrit and bhāṣā and follow the sometimes faint but no less present thread of Prakrit and Apbhramsha poetry, and how these traditions contributed to shape Brajabuli as a vernacular of a different kind in the poetic landscape of North India.